

2012

## The birds of Edward Lear

Rob Sellick

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sellick, Rob, The birds of Edward Lear, *Kunapipi*, 34(2), 2012.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol34/iss2/13>

---

## The birds of Edward Lear

### Abstract

I Edward Lear is justly famous for his nonsense verse — is there anyone with English as their mother tongue who isn't familiar with 'The Owl and the Pussy Cat'? This poem, however, is one of his longer nonsense verses, along with other magnificent examples such as 'The Pobble Who Has No Toes'. But Lear had other claims to fame, although not in his own lifetime. Most of his life was spent as a landscape painter and traveller throughout what was then known as the 'Levant' and in recent times his watercolour landscapes have changed hands at enormous prices — but not, as he had hoped, his oils. Lear first came to prominence as an illustrator of birds, and this essay will concentrate on this aspect of his work. It is possible, as I will argue, that his interest in birds continued to preoccupy him throughout his life and may even be used as a useful indicator of his personal and emotional life.

ROB SELICK

## The Birds of Edward Lear

I

Edward Lear is justly famous for his nonsense verse — is there anyone with English as their mother tongue who isn't familiar with 'The Owl and the Pussy Cat'? This poem, however, is one of his longer nonsense verses, along with other magnificent examples such as 'The Pobble Who Has No Toes'. But Lear had other claims to fame, although not in his own lifetime. Most of his life was spent as a landscape painter and traveller throughout what was then known as the 'Levant' and in recent times his watercolour landscapes have changed hands at enormous prices — but not, as he had hoped, his oils. Lear first came to prominence as an illustrator of birds, and this essay will concentrate on this aspect of his work. It is possible, as I will argue, that his interest in birds continued to preoccupy him throughout his life and may even be used as a useful indicator of his personal and emotional life.

Edward Lear was born in Holloway, London in 1812, the twentieth child of Jeremiah and Ann. His father had been Master of the Fruiterer's Company and a Proprietor or Founding Member of the London Stock Exchange. However, Jeremiah Lear fell on hard times, the family split up and Edward, to ease the burden on his mother, was placed in the care of his elder sister Ann. What little education he received came from Ann and another sister Sarah, although Lear stated that he went briefly to school at age 11. He also suffered from epilepsy, which he described as 'the Demon', as well as bouts of acute depression, which he called 'the Morbids', and weak eyesight.

His sisters, however, did teach him to draw and paint. Their father had owned some good paintings and one of the downstairs rooms was set aside as a painting room. Here the two sisters taught him one of the social accomplishments as they themselves had learnt it — the painting of 'flowers and butterflies and birds' (Noakes 22). In 1827 Jeremiah, who was now 70, decided to retire and he moved with his wife and one daughter to Gravesend. No provision was made for Edward and he was forced to fend for himself, although under the care of Ann, who had inherited a small annuity from her grandmother. From the age of 15, then, Lear was forced to earn a living, which he did by making and selling small drawings. He described these as 'uncommon queer shop-sketches' (such as coloured prints, screens, fans and even medical drawings for hospitals and doctors) (Noakes 29). His skill developed to the stage where he became an accomplished illustrator, especially of birds and animals at the London Zoo. How did this come about? The Zoological Society's archives indicate that 'he was given permission to make

drawings of parrots belonging to the Society... This was a privilege granted to anyone who wished for it and signified very little' (Reade 10). Some light is thrown on this vague remark about working for the Zoological Society, by a book entitled *The Gardens of the Zoological Society Delineated*, produced under the supervision of E.T. Bennett, Secretary of the Society, and printed at the Chiswick Press in 1830–31. In one vignette, a wood-engraving of the Red and Yellow Macaws, Lear's monogram is evident. He also worked with Prideaux Selby and later with Selby and Jardine on their *Illustrations of Ornithology* and this proved 'a fortunate apprenticeship, for it taught Lear to be bold and imaginative in his work' (Noakes 30). He now had the skill and confidence to try a book of his own. He prepared lithographic plates from the drawings and sketches he made of the parrots at the zoo and he planned to publish these in fourteen folios for subscribers. The first two folios were ready on 1st November 1830 and the next day he was nominated as an Associate of the Linnean Society. He was only 18!

Since Lear had had no formal training as an artist and certainly not as an engraver he decided to use a new technique — lithography. The process of lithography was invented by Alois Senefelder in Prague in 1798. He visited London in 1801 and Charles Joseph Hullmandel became interested in the new process. Hullmandel demonstrated the lithographic technique in 1818 in his book, *Twenty-four Views of Italy*. A translation of Senefelder's *Complete Course of Lithography* was published in 1819. This was followed by Hullmandel's *The Art of Drawing on Stone* in 1824. Although the first hand-coloured plate of a bird was published in 1820, no one had published a book dealing exclusively with one bird and this Lear decided to do using the new process in his *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*.

Lear became one of the most accomplished lithographers and one who recognised the possibilities of the grain of the stone: how it could be used to vary tone and line, especially in the graduation of closely packed feathers. Although the wrapper promised 14 folios only 12 were completed. They appeared between November 1830 and April 1832. Although the book was an artistic triumph it was not a financial success and Lear abandoned the project.

Susan Hyman, in *Edward Lear's Birds*, includes a series of plates that demonstrate Lear's detailed preparation of Plate No. 2, the Salmon-crested Cockatoo (*Ptyctolophus rosaceus*) and it is worth examining these in detail. The initial drawing, labelled '4/5 nat. size', shows the bird's pose clearly established with one of its talons grasping a branch and the other raised against its body and looking down at the observer. The cockatoo, shown in a three-quarter view, is already engaged with the viewer. There is minimal detail as far as feathers are concerned — only the main shaft or rachis is shown and these are restricted to the wings.

The second preparatory sketch is much more detailed and includes a first attempt at colouration. The feathers are remarkably detailed: not only are the



Plate No. 2 Salmon-Crested Cockatoo. (<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/171.dl/DLDecArts.LearParrots>)



Plate 9. Red and Yellow Macaw. (<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/171.dl/DLDecArts.LearParrots>)



rachises shown but the barbs are indicated as well. The watercolour sketch of the bird is surrounded by pencilled notes and colour tests. For example, there is a note alongside the bird's neck that reads 'xx straight lines' as a reminder of the treatment of the barbs of the feathers. This sketch is followed by a finished watercolour, still with the bird glancing down towards the viewer's left. The crest is coloured a pale red and there are touches of yellow on the tail. The setting is still minimal: merely the branch on which the bird is perched (signed on the right-hand end 'E. Lear') and some leaves in outline. This watercolour is labelled and noted as 'No. 2. This is the illustration that Lear would have transferred to the lithographic stone to produce the final print that was then hand-coloured by assistants at Hullmandel's. The published plate shows the bird coloured pale lemon over most of its body but with a more intense colour for the tail feathers. There is a gleam in the parrot's eye and the beak appears polished — due no doubt to the use of egg white. Overall, though, the bird's individuality shines through. Such a meticulous approach is evident in each of the forty-two plates: a blend of scientific precision and an understanding of and sympathy for the birds. It is possible to single out particular plates for their representation of particular parrots but several would be difficult to ignore. I have already drawn attention to Plate no. 2, the Salmon-crested Cockatoo and there are at least two others that demand attention: the Red and yellow Macaw (plate 9) and Baudin's Cockatoo (plate 7). This particular plate has been described as a perfect manifestation of Lear's singular talent, and is one of the most skilful drawings of birds ever done. I would also point out that the complete set of the original plates of the *Psittacidae* has been digitised and is available at <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/DLDecArts.LearParrots>.

## II

While Lear was sketching his parrots in the Zoological Gardens he had been introduced to Lord Stanley, who was the President of the Linnean Society and a founding member of the Zoological Society. Stanley, the heir to the Earl of Derby, had built up an enormous menagerie at his ancestral home, Knowsley, near Liverpool. Following Lear's success with his book of parrots, Lord Stanley invited him to Knowsley to make drawings of the birds and animals there. This, as Vivian Noakes states, 'was the most far-reaching invitation of Lear's life' (Noakes 40). Lear first visited Knowsley in October 1831 and at first he was treated as an employee and housed and fed in the servants' quarters but that soon changed and he was accepted fully into the family. When Lord Stanley succeeded to the title in 1834 he embarked on an extensive scheme of expansion and improvement to the menagerie. Much of Lear's work at Knowsley was collected and privately published in 1846 under the title, *Gleanings from the Menagerie and Aviary at Knowsley*, edited by J.E. Gray who also wrote the Preface:

The following Plates are selected from the Series of drawings made by Mr. Edward Lear from the living animals in the Right Honourable the Earl of Derby's Menagerie at Knowsley Hall, forming part of the large collections of Zoological Drawings in his



Plate 7. Baudin's Cockatoo. (<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/171.dl/DLDecArts.LearParrots>)



Lordship's library. They have been lithographed with great care by Mr. J.W. Moore, and coloured by Mr. Bayfield. Their chief value consists in their being accurate representations of living specimens.

The true significance of Vivian Noakes' statement of the 'far-reaching invitation' now becomes apparent. Lord Derby and his nephew Robert Hornby offered to fund Lear so that he could travel to Rome and begin a new career as a landscape painter. He had become increasingly interested in landscape while he was at Knowsley and he was also aware that with his failing eyesight he could not continue with the demanding work of bird illustrations. However, the artistic success of the *Psittacidae* meant that Lear was much in demand as a zoological illustrator. He contributed drawings for the *Transactions of the Zoological Society* and *The Zoology of Captain Beechey's Voyage* and possibly for *The Zoology of the Voyage of HMS Beagle*. He also did drawings for Sir William Jardine's series, *The Naturalist's Library*, for Thomas Eyton's *A Monograph of the Anatidae, or Duck Tribe* as well as Thomas Bell's *A History of British Quadrupeds* and *A Monograph of the Testudinata*.

Another person he worked for was John Gould, who had also brought out a bird book in 1831: *A Century of Birds from the Himalayan Mountains*. Gould was aware of the impact of Lear's book and he modelled his own on it, both in format and in the use of lithography. When Lear abandoned his book of parrots he sold the plates to John Gould and also agreed to train Gould's wife Elizabeth in the use of lithography.

It was Lear's example that provided the impetus for Gould's first publication, and it was Lear who later transformed Gould's static and rather unimaginative style into the confident and innovative work that characterised his second and all subsequent publications. (Tree 43)

Gould planned and wrote the book himself but the drawings were the work of others, especially his wife Elizabeth and Lear. No mention was made of Lear's contribution as Gould felt that as he had paid Lear for his work he could claim them as his own.

Lear also worked for Gould on later books: *A Monograph of Ramphastidae, or Family of Toucans* and the five-volume *The Birds of Europe* (1832–1837). Although Gould acknowledged Lear's help with drawings he nevertheless subscribed plates 'By J. & E. Gould' even though Lear had signed them. For example, when Gould's *Birds of Europe* appeared it attracted great praise for Gould but hardly a mention of Elizabeth Gould or of Lear. Even when Lear's plates are acknowledged they are awarded only a cursory 'E. Lear del at lith'.

The relationship of the two men was never an easy one. Gould was the elder by eight years. He was the son of a gardener at Windsor Castle but in 1827 he was appointed taxidermist to the Zoological Society where he became a self-appointed zoologist. While he was no artist, he did provide sketches of the birds he employed others to illustrate as well as the general plan of the volumes. No

artist, but an effective businessman — which Lear was not. Over a long career Gould published 41 large volumes, including some 3,000 superb plates. When Lear was informed of Gould's death in 1881 he recalled the man.

He was one I never liked really, for in spite of a certain jollity or bonhomie, he was a harsh and violent man. At the Zoological S. at 33 Bruton St. — at Hullmandels — at Broad St. ever the same persevering hardworking toiler in his own (ornithological) line, — but ever as unfeeling for those about him. In the earliest phase of his bird-drawing he owed everything to his excellent wife, & to myself, — without whose help in drawing he had done nothing. (qtd in Tree 43–44]

### III

When Lear was first invited to Knowsley Hall his position in the stately home was uncertain since he came as both a guest and an employee. On his arrival he was shown to the servants' quarters but that was soon to change. In any case the children of the house, of whom there was a great number, soon sought him out and each evening they gathered in the steward's quarters, fascinated by Lear's ability to entertain them with his drollery. Angus Davidson provides a more detailed account of Lear's position in the household and his relationship with his employer's grandchildren:

[Lord Derby's grandchildren] were in the habit of dining every day with their grandfather, but soon Lord Derby remarked that they now seemed anxious, instead of sitting with him during the evening, to make their escape as soon as dinner was over. On his inquiring the reason for this they replied, with the candour of youth, that it was so much more amusing downstairs. "And why?" asked Lord Derby. "Oh, because that young fellow in the steward's room who is drawing the birds for you is such good company, and we like to go and hear him talk." (15)

He began to amuse them by drawing odd looking birds and animals and people with funny noses, and he made up ridiculous rhymes for them, and then someone asked him if he had seen a book which had been published about ten years before, called *Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen*. It contained illustrated verses like this one:

There was a sick man of Tobago  
Liv'd long on rice-gruel and sago;  
But at last, to his bliss,  
The physician said this —  
'To a roast leg of mutton you may go.'

Obviously this kind of rhyme and drawing could be adapted to tell the remarkable stories of all kinds of men and women, and when Lear made up some for the children they were greeted with 'uproarious delight and welcome' (Noakes 33). A fitting start to his career as a nonsense writer.

The verses in *Anecdotes* were versions of the limerick and Lear adopted the form quite happily. In choosing his subjects he clearly drew on his work at Knowsley and it seems evident that he also made use of the various authors

he worked with. These ‘Nonsenses’ were eventually published in *A Book of Nonsenses* in 1846 and for this he used the pseudonym ‘Derry Down Derry’. This was to be followed by another four in Lear’s lifetime, the last, *Laughable Lyrics, A Fourth Book of Nonsense Poems* appearing in 1877. The first verse in *A Book of Nonsense* goes as follows:

There was an Old Man with a beard  
Who said, ‘It is just as I feared!—  
Two Owls and a Hen, four Larks and a Wren,  
Have all built their nests in my beard!

This verse is illustrated with a fellow with a remarkably long and bushy beard and the weight of the birds has clearly caused him to rise from his chair. It is obvious that the Old Man is far from pleased!

There is also a delightful verse about a Young Lady who has a similar problem with birds but she doesn’t seem at all agitated, in fact she appears quite delighted. And the sketch of the birds either circling or perched on her hat is almost a series of miniatures.



There was a Young Lady whose bonnet  
Came untied when the birds sat upon it;  
But she said, ‘I don’t care!  
All the birds in the air  
Are welcome to sit on my bonnet!’

When Lear came to collect and publish the original ‘Nonsenses’ he made their origins clear:

Dedication  
To the  
GREAT-GRANDCHILDREN,

GRAND-NEPHEWS, AND GRAND-NIECES  
 OF EDWARD, 13<sup>th</sup> EARL OF DERBY,  
 THIS BOOK OF DRAWINGS & VERSES  
 (The greater part of which were originally made  
 and composed for their parents)  
 IS DEDICATED BY  
 THE AUTHOR  
 EDWARD LEAR

Lear provided a statement 'By Way of Preface' for an American reprint published by Roberts Brothers of Boston in 1894:

The first edition of the 'Book of Nonsense' was published in 1846, lithographed by tracing paper... In 1862 a second edition of the Book of Nonsense was published and is now in its sixteenth thousand. O bother!

This is a great indication of the continuing popularity of Lear's Nonsenses. And it seems to be the case that Lear's nonsense books have remained in print ever since.

Thomas Byron, in his important study of Lear claims that: 'In both series [of limericks] there are more birds than any other creatures. Lear began his career drawing parrots and he was always fascinated by owls, ducks, geese and ravens' (62). He argues that Lear's fascination with birds can be related to the artist's state of mind and he uses the changes in the relationship between birds and humans that appear in the verses as evidence for Lear's biography. Whether or not this argument is sustainable is debateable; what is beyond doubt is the fact that the fascination that began in the cages of the London Zoological Society bore wondrous fruit.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I should point out that I am indebted to a number of precursors, especially for biographical information. Is there anyone working on Lear who is not indebted to Vivian Noakes for her magisterial studies? Susan Hyman also deserves acknowledgement for her outstanding works on Lear's birds and I am deeply in her debt.

## WORKS CITED

- Byron, Thomas 1977, *Nonsense and Wonder: The Poems and Cartoons of Edward Lear*, E.P. Dutton, New York.
- Davidson, Angus [1938] 1968, *Edward Lear: Landscape Painter and Nonsense Poet (1812–1888)*, John Murray, London.
- Hyman, Susan 1980, *Edward Lear's Birds*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London.
- Noakes, Vivian 1968, *Edward Lear: The Life of a Wanderer*, Collins, London.
- Reade, Brian 1949, *Edward Lear's Parrots*, Duckworth, London.
- Tree, Isabella 1991, *The Bird Man: The Extraordinary Story of John Gould*, Barry & Jenkins, London (repr. Ebury Press, 2004).